

Combining Conservation and Care: Community Participation in Conservation and Health



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INTRODUCTION

Community participation is one of the underlying approaches that Conservation International (CI) uses to build local commitment and capacity to conserve biodiversity hotspots around the world. This is especially true in the Population Environment (PE) program in integrated health and conservation activities. There are numerous, diverse ways in which to engage local communities, and CI has experience with many of them. In the past five years, CI has utilized Participatory Land Use Planning (PLUP) in Cambodia, Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) in the Philippines, and the Champion Community approach in Madagascar. CI learns more about working with communities every day—about the great effort, flexibility, and awareness needed to promote quality community engagement and ownership in sustainable conservation.



Conservation programs should have a holistic approach, addressing community issues that influence conservation.

Community Engagement Tools



In Cambodia, the PLUP program excited participants, because they were able to say, “Now we can manage our forest again.”

OVERVIEW

The PE program works with partner organizations at the community level to build awareness and local capacity to deliver health services and reduce population pressure on natural resources.

Cambodia

Located in southwestern Cambodia, the Central Cardamom Protected Forest (CCPF) is home to over 30 globally threatened species listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™. Despite their rich surroundings, the area’s 5,000 human inhabitants suffer some of the worst socioeconomic conditions in the world. The country’s poor economy, especially in rural areas such as the CCPF, forces many citizens to rely intensively on natural resource extraction to survive. Illegal logging, clear-cutting for agriculture, wildlife hunting, and a growing wildlife trade have combined with a rapidly increasing human population to take a significant toll on conservation of this critical watershed and forest habitat. Years of civil conflict have caused great distrust among the population, and government-sponsored social services are minimal. Now a renewed sense of urgency to protect the natural legacy of the CCPF has spurred preservation efforts, successful because the local people themselves are directly involved in conservation.

Since 2002, CI has been working with the villages in and around the CCPF to complete PLUP to determine the best use of local lands for both economic and conservation purposes. Members of the communities create maps that illustrate the current uses of their land and then come together with CI technical staff to determine how to modify their practices to ensure preservation of the environmental resources upon which they rely. PLUP, besides proving to be technically valuable, carries special significance in Cambodia. The

democratic process is just beginning in this country, and the free democratic elections used to select environmental leaders for PLUP are among the first such elections in which the people participated. Since the process began, more than 540 men and women have participated in the PLUP process.

CI has played an integral part not only in preserving Cambodia’s vital natural resources, but also in advancing the cause of the local people. PLUP gives the people for whom conservation is most important a forum for discuss-



Map of Cambodia



CI Cambodia community engagement field team takes a rest during a PLUP transect walk.

ing their concerns and the power to do something about them. The results have been unprecedented. Commune inhabitants feel that they finally have control over their own land, and they show up to meetings in large numbers to use their newly found voices. Women and indigenous Khmer Daeum people, who are not used to having their opinions count, take active part in community decisionmaking. In one community called Tatai Leu, a young indigenous woman was elected chief of the Commune Natural Resource Management Committee—another milestone in a traditionally male-dominated society. These participatory approaches and mechanisms promote sustainable natural resource management in line with community priorities.

The Philippines

One of the principle objectives of the CI Philippines PE project in Baggao in the Sierra Madre Biodiversity Corridor on the island of Luzon is to build the capacity of target communities to effectively manage the identified CBFM and Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC) projects. CI and PROCESS-Luzon (a nongovernmental partner organization) work with many government partners to do this. In partnership with the Philippines Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Local Government Unit, CI and partners provided technical support to the CBFM people's organization in the review and updating of the Community Resource Management

Framework, the CBFM's management plan. From a series of participatory workshops, key stakeholders identified a number of common problems, such as the lack of clear zoning of CBFM areas to delineate multiple-use zones and strictly protected zones, and the lack of updated human population data for the area. Also, little information exists to show the extent of various threats to the CBFM, such as



CI Mexico staff works with women's enterprise group on gardening project in Chiapas, Mexico.

human population pressure brought about by natural birth and in-migration, timber poaching, slash-and-burn farming, wildlife hunting, mining, and collection of limestone in cave areas.

With the updated Community Resource Management Framework, the local communities recognized the importance of zoning after seeing the results of community mapping, and they are now conducting appropriate forest development and management, a continuous awareness campaign, and active participation in capacity-building activities. These activities include establishment of community nurseries and agroforestry farms, participation in information, education, and communication (IEC) for both natural resource conservation and reproductive health and family planning (RH/FP), ecotourism development, and enforcement of existing forestry laws to protect and manage their CBFM areas.

Working with the Agta indigenous people, the PE Baggao Project provided continuous guidance and raised awareness



Dalaw-Turo Core Group members present an IEC session on health and conservation in the Philippines, June 2004.

of the importance of their role in safeguarding, managing, and protecting the CADC. The project likewise began assisting the indigenous people in the conversion process from

From Hunters and Loggers to Community Educators: The Dalaw-Turo Core Group in the PE Project in Baggao, the Philippines

- Three years ago, the rural community of Baggao was full of hunters, illegal loggers, and farmers practicing slash-and-burn agriculture. They were desperate families heavily dependent on upland resources for basic survival. They have now turned from these destructive practitioners to be active community residents who are advocating and practicing sustainable natural resource use.
- How did these extractors become active environmentalists? In July 2003, the DENR initiated an enhancement training on informal environmental education for indigenous peoples' organizations in the region. DENR is the primary government agency responsible for conservation, management, protection, proper use, and sustainable development of the country's environment and natural resources. CI works closely with the DENR staff to conserve the biodiversity around Baggao, but this training highlighted a different approach to conservation—a local community-based core group called the Dalaw-Turo core group. The Dalaw-Turo core group is a community-based information and education group running from one street to another, moving from one community and school to another, advocating not only biodiversity conservation and RH/FP, but also the links and interrelationships between these two pressing local concerns.
- This informal, environmental education methodology is proving to be an effective way in demonstrating the importance of local conservation efforts. This IEC approach combines information dissemination and entertainment, so that it not only informs, but also entertains local community residents, who respond well to underlying messages. The Dalaw-Turo core group uses environmental games, skits, folklore, and other nontraditional methodologies that further communication and awareness education, and that transform the once-destructive members of the community into local educators.
- In 2005, the Dalaw-Turo core group conducted 15 IEC campaigns in the six barangays (local community areas) included in CI's PE project target zone. According to a recently conducted community-based survey, the community-initiated IEC activities led to an increased number of couples engaging into RH/FP methods and higher levels of awareness among youth and the general public of the state of their environment. Furthermore, the "Ligtas Buntis" (Safe Pregnancy) campaign of the Philippine Department of Health (a CI partner agency) conducted during the summer of 2005 showed that the majority of the 246 bilateral tubal ligation and 4 no-scalpel vasectomy pioneer-acceptors were participants in the series of Dalaw-Turo core group campaigns in the PE project site.

CADC to a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title and the formulation of an Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan. This process is critical because it ensures indigenous groups have the legal rights and access to resources to manage their lands.

Mexico

In Mexico, the PE project has fostered community participation through several mechanisms. The project has accomplished the following:

- Trained and educated rural health volunteers to work with the Mexican Social Security Institute to disseminate integrated health and conservation messages in the 20 focal communities and surrounding areas.
- Delivered environmental education seminars and trained youth leaders, rural health outreach workers, and local



Water resources play an important part of conservation in Chiapas, Mexico.



Map of Chiapas, Mexico.

midwives about the importance of forest fire prevention, species conservation, and environmental services. More than 200 environmental educators and 20 functional medical units have been created, and two youth groups have been consolidated into a civil association called Youth Group for Conservation of the Lacandona Forest.

- Worked with three microenterprise groups of women to promote community awareness of species conservation and opportunities for alternative livelihoods.

LESSONS LEARNED

In the course of our community engagement during the past five years, CI and our partners have learned the following lessons.

- Conservation and health professionals working with local communities must be flexible and innovative. In many of the areas that need the most help, the landscape itself changes daily. Actors need to be aware that plans they make today may be impossible to carry out only days later, and they need to be prepared to deal with rapid change.
- Personal relationships are a major part of life in small villages—especially remote, rural ones. These relationships are vital to gain acceptance by and access to a community. People who do not get to know community members personally will find it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve lasting results. Sharing meals with people and making meetings fun and inclusive will lead to more participation.
- When engaging community members to participate in a project, one must learn how to listen, observe, and read nonverbal communication clues. Different communi-



Women's enterprise group working together in the Selva Lacandona, Mexico.

ties—especially small villages—have methods of conduct that may be very different from those to which a NGO worker may be accustomed. Ignoring these differences can be detrimental to a project. Community members may not bluntly express what they think or want, but the NGO worker must figure out the messages people wish to convey. It is important not to act like a detached outsider and to abide by customary methods of conduct in order to encourage true community participation.

- It is essential to keep one's word and one's promises. One should not make loose promises to assist the community in a particular area unless one intends to actually do so. Communities have long memories, and failing to fulfill one's promises is a sure way to lose trust and participation.
- Teamwork and open communication are vital among partner NGOs. CI has a tradition of working with our partners in order to broaden CI's knowledge of the region and our ability to work with and reach the local people. However, working with partners poses challenges as well. If all partners do not have exactly the same understanding of project goals, limits, responsibilities, and workplan, project progress can be impeded. In addition, one must carefully consider all aspects of a decision to include a partner in a project. For instance, CI Cambodia's PE staff members learned that you cannot "outsource" community engagement, and receive the expected results.
- People must have a stake in their future well-being and the results of their delegated actions. When working with

land issues, one must acknowledge the role of people's rights to land and other resources. Communities have protected their land to use its resources, and will be wary of environmental groups that wish to assume ownership or stewardship of their traditional holdings. In some situations, the communities have lost or never possessed legal state-recognized title to their land; by reestablishing the communities' rights, an NGO will ensure broad and enthusiastic participation in its projects. In Cambodia, the PLUP program excited participants, because they were able to say, "Now we can manage our forest again." Full land rights also make progress and conservation sustainable; when the NGOs leave or reduce their presence, community members will be much more likely to continue their conservation activities themselves.

- Conservation programs should have a holistic approach, addressing community issues that influence the success of conservation. For instance, in Cambodia, major land disputes and land-ownership issues afflicted the area when CI arrived. CI's plan to restore rights to the people who depend most on local natural resources encouraged high participation in the PLUP process. An environmental NGO will find it difficult to gain acceptance and participation in an area without addressing problems with which the local people themselves are most concerned. Integrated projects with clearly stated objectives can work well, because they link the solution of more pressing issues to support for the environmental activities that may be less urgent to the local people.

- New approaches to participation must be constantly explored. Village meetings are the most widespread method of garnering support and participation, but they alone may be insufficient. Powerful figures and large stakeholders in a project (e.g., the legal owners of land to be included in a new land-use plan) may not necessarily attend village meetings. New and innovative methods of encouraging the participation of all stakeholders at all levels will be needed.
- One must recognize the differences—large and small—in culture and attitude among communities. The same approach will not work in all communities, even those from the same region.
- All members of the community need to perceive that they will benefit from the project in some way, even if they will not directly participate in the project. In the Mexican state of Chiapas, culture dictates that the men of the villages decide whether or not the women may participate in a women's microenterprise initiative. CI workers had to ensure the men came to the community information sessions, so that they would understand and support the plan; otherwise it would not have worked. This example



Young men participate in a forest fire prevention education session in the Selva Lacandona, southern Mexico.

not only illustrates the importance of understanding differences in cultures, but also that the whole community must be involved in the process, even if they are not targeted participants.



A doctor and nurse from the Mexican Social Security Institute, CI's partner, provide health services and information in communities in southern Mexico.

PHOTO CREDITS

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